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The Pregnant Widow by Martin Amis

Amis writes on sex and death with the confidence of a master; but pomposity blunts his greatness

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Martin Amis has come home, which is why *The Pregnant Widow*, his latest novel, has been so keenly anticipated. In the past decade his books have wandered from Russia (*Koba the Dread*, *House of Meetings*) via America (*Night Train*) to the Islamic world (*The Second Plane*). These books have not been, even his fans admit, his best. But with his new novel Amis is back in Kent and Christendom and dealing with the subjects that made him famous: sex, comedy, Britain.

It is the summer of 1970 and a group of attractive young English men and women have gathered in a castle in Italy. Among them is Keith Nearing, nearly 21, a student of literature and a potential poet; with him are two blondes, Lily, his former girlfriend with whom he is still sleeping, and her friend Scheherazade, who is more attractive. They, and other young people, have come to the castle to enjoy the gifts newly given to them by the sexual revolution: to swear, swim topless and have sex. The buzzing sense of fresh, limitless erotic licence is captured brilliantly in the opening scenes: a girl notes casually that her panties have been “sucked off” by a Jacuzzi.

Any young man would die to be where Keith is. The views around his castle are spectacular, the huge Italian skies and sunsets are described with Amis’s usual power with weather and landscape. The views at his swimming pool are even better; Scheherazade prefers the “monokini” to the bikini. Keith, who has brought along a stack of 19th-century novels to read with Lily, who may well be the love of his life, tries not to pay attention. But not pay attention to Scheherazade? — sleeping alone in the room next door, sharing a bathroom with him, looking so intently at him at the pool. They decide to do it in the maid’s room.

At this stage *The Pregnant Widow* sounds like a young writer’s novel, a sex-and-conversation comedy on the pattern of Aldous Huxley’s *Crome Yellow*. But Amis recently turned 60, and this is a much unhappier book than it first seems to be. The scenes of the castle in 1970 are intercut with descriptions of Keith in the present day, now on the “the bullet-train of the fifties”. We discover that he has not been successful, either as a poet or with women, and the narrator of the novel (Amis’s metafictional voice, curbed in his recent work, makes an irritating reappearance) blames that summer in the Italian castle for all that went wrong. This warning is laid on thick, as if from a worry that without some heavy foreshadowing the events in the castle will not hold our attention.

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The worry is fully justified. After an effervescent start, things go flat. Keith seems to carry, for a 21-year-old, an excessive and unexplained burden of guilt and anxiety. Much of his torment is apparently due to his attachment to Violet, his promiscuous and scandal-ridden sister; yet Violet is never properly developed. Only those who have read Amis describe his own sister

will be able to make sense of Keith’s troubles with his. Like the bad conscience of the new era, Violet seems to interfere each time Keith makes love to Lily. Even when he changes partners, Keith’s love-making stays largely listless, giving the impression that the sexual revolution wasn’t so much fun — for straight men, anyway. At least he comes to life. Few others in this book do.

Adriano, a sporty, muscular Italian staying at the castle, is full of promise but turns into an excuse for a digression into Italian history under and immediately after Mussolini. Giant packages of cultural information, mostly irrelevant to the action of the novel, and frequently recycled from Amis’s recent nonfiction — on etymology, Greek myth, the 19th-century English novel, the Second World War, Iraq — are airdropped into the novel; you get

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the sense that Amis is operating an heroic famine-relief effort for his culturally undernourished readers. (Do you know what "ulterior" means in Latin? Don't worry: Martin will explain.) At times he dispenses with the whole annoying storytelling business, as, for instance, when he says, in the midst of a novel about the upheavals of the 1970s: "There would be regime change in Baghdad, in 2003, so that there would be no regime change in Washington, in 2004." Meanwhile, back at the castle, numerous minor figures walk in, strip, jump into the pool and make long and boring conversation. One of these walk-on figures is apparently meant to be Christopher Hitchens, who should sue because the character is so bland. Only Keith stays interesting. On the evening of his big rendezvous he shows off at dinner by doubting the existence of God; Scheherazade goes pale. It turns out that she is intensely religious. She will not sleep with an atheist. Lily finds out about their intended rendezvous. And so, at the dawn of a new age, Keith's situation is very old-fashioned and Roman Catholic: without having slept with Scheherazade he has to live with the consequences of having done so. He gets neither his fun nor his fidelity.

He comes back to London, and the chapters run in fast-forward: it is as if we are in another book. The 1970s turn into the 1980s and the floodgates of free love open wide for everyone else. The revolution, which has split love from sex, turns out to be a disaster for Keith: no love and not much sex, either. It isn't much better for the girls. His sister stays inveterately promiscuous until her death; some of his female friends end up not having the children they wanted; those who become religious are the happiest and most fecund; and we end on the glum note that because the sexual revolution has reduced the native birthrate, Muslims may well dominate the West in 100 years.

If things were really this bad, you have to wonder, wouldn't we all have agreed to return by now to the old regime of no sex outside marriage? This novel's insights into the sexual revolution are sometimes acute and sometimes limited by masculine self-pity, which can reach ludicrous levels. When Keith goes out to meet the newly liberated young women of London he finds that "[each] and every one of them hated him already". Those evil feminists. Yet you can't help but feel for Keith, a man so completely lost in his time: promised so much in that summer of 1970, he realises that he has received so little. If only we were offered more of his heartache and less commentary on Mussolini and *Pride and Prejudice*. A potentially stunning novel ends up containing the familiar ratio of what is good and bad in Amis's writing, the usual mix of Amis gems and Amis junk.

The title of this novel, intended to be a metaphor for an incomplete sexual revolution — the old is dead but the new not yet born — serves equally as a metaphor for its author's career. The critic Richard Ellman said of Yeats that he became a great poet when he abandoned the "rhythms of longing" — his nervous, self-effacing early verse — for the "rhythms of conquest", the forceful poetry of his maturity. With Amis things have gone in reverse. The brilliant, brazen writer of *The Rachel Papers* has been groping for years for voice, rhythm, subject. Declining strength has been matched by rising self-esteem: in a pompous afterword to *The Pregnant Widow* he high-fives old mates such as Auden and Will Shakespeare, just as at the end of *House of Meetings*, an interesting minor novel, he *salaams* Conrad and Dostoevsky. This is silly stuff, and only because Amis really could be one of the greats.

Fifteen years ago an American novelist in his early sixties was regarded much as Amis is today: as a man "self-flung away", the most dazzling young writer of his generation who had lamed himself in middle age on fame and self-regard. And then, out of the blue, Philip Roth came good. The novelists of the 1980s — Rushdie, Amis, McEwan, Ishiguro and Carey — are at the age when Roth began his second run. In each of these men the process of the writer's reinvigoration, as mysterious as the initial appearance of talent, must be under way. The alembic is dripping, the alchemical broth of resurgent genius is brewing: surely in one of these five it will boil over. I suggested recently to a few critics that Amis was the one most likely to "pull a Roth". They responded with scepticism. Kermit the Frog, it was felt, would be more likely to pull a Roth. It is a sign of how far Amis's reputation as a serious artist has fallen.

Yet he is beginning to write with Old Master assurance on the important subjects. Perhaps you have to be a narcissist on the scale of a Roth or an Amis to interpret a mundane fact — I am going to die some day — as an archetypal confrontation: Everyman Shall Stand Before Death. Dying is like this, Keith Nearing thinks: "... he knew that when the process began, the only thing that would matter was how it had gone with women. As he lies dying, the man will search his past for love and life." If Amis keeps writing like this about death, he can still prove everyone wrong.

The Pregnant Widow by Martin Amis Jonathan Cape, £18.99;
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